

The Mainstream- Where Indians Drown



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I offer a solution to a substantial portion of the "Indian problem" of economic dependence and psychological crippling that continues under the present federally administered policies. The dependency policy was preceded by attempts at physical annihilation of the Indian. Contributing to the problem are the reservation system, which isolates the Indian, and attempts at assimilation through relocation in urban centers, where practice of the traditional Indian ways is virtually impossible.

For the future, the current official policy of Indian involvement is feared by many Indians as a mask to be swept away, to reveal termination of the special relationship that has existed, equated by the more dependent with death. My solution is not new to progressive Indian leaders but is somewhat inconceivable to the average American. It is offered with the humbling awareness that I am generalizing for 700,000 tribally recognized American Indians in 25 States, who speak more than 75 Indian



Love and happiness on the reservation

languages and dialects.

Marked differences exist in the traditions of Indians living only a few miles from each other, yet they retain common values that sharply set them apart from non-Indians. Lack of awareness of these Indian characteristics has resulted in the almost universal cry from the urban dweller, regardless of where on the spectrum from deep sympathy through guilt to disgust he may be, to “get them into the mainstream,” thus presuming that Indians better themselves by incorporating the white man’s social values, economic philosophy, and family life style.

The experience of Indians in the past 20 years in relocating in

major urban centers is antipathetic to their basic beliefs—to a point where they have rejected more than a veneer of the white man’s conventions despite intermarriage, vocational change, or diverse social preference (1). I propose, by being receptive to the hopes of Indian leaders, the economic development of their tribally governed communities—enough to attract investment capital and supplement a shift in Federal funds from doles that foster crippling dependency to “seed” money that could free the Indians to live apart with dignity.

Background

The ancestors of these native Americans—representing one of

the three major identifiable minorities in the United States today along with the blacks, formerly known as American Negroes, and the Chicanos, formerly known as Spanish Americans or Mexican Americans—probably entered this hemisphere from Asia about 25,000 years ago, and by 10,000 years ago had migrated to the southern tip of South America (2). The oldest identifiable tribe today is that of the Hopi Indian of north central Arizona, who was functioning 500 years before Columbus arrived much as he functions today. More than 1 million Indians are thought to have been inhabiting this country when Columbus landed. Their capacity

to survive, adapt, and change despite a variety of hardships is well known. That their number had diminished to an estimated 243,000 by the late 19th century, primarily from war and disease, will forever be a scar on the white man's conscience.

Although efforts of the Public Health Service (3) to bring modern medical techniques to the Indians have resulted in a birth rate more than double that of the general U.S. population and have increased their life expectancy at a rate three times the national average—still 6 years short of the average non-Indian—do not think of the pre-white-man Indians as being helpless victims of their physical environment. They taught our forefathers the values of close family life, the techniques of successful farming, folk healing, and how to exist by hunting live game. They gave us their discoveries of cocaine, quinine, novocaine, witch hazel, and many other drugs. In the 400 years that physicians and botanists have been examining and analyzing the flora of America they have not discovered a medicinal herb unknown to the Indians (4).

While most health professionals realize the power the medicine man possessed through psychological techniques, few may know about the sophisticated dream psychotherapeutic system that the Iroquois used 200 years before Freud (5). They believed then, as thousands privately do today, that to be sick is to be out of harmony with nature, and that only medicine men trained in the folk arts of the tribe could diagnose their sickness and effect a cure.

Is it any wonder then that the white man is resented? He has forced changes on the Indians by

legislating against their old means of survival. He has broken treaties of self-authorship when these treaties have become inconvenient. How hollow ring the reassuring phrases of those original treaties between the U.S. Government and the sovereign Indian nations that promised freedom from harassment and a fair share of the wealth of their former territorial holdings ". . . as long as the grass is green, and the rivers flow, and the sun sinks in the West."

Life Style and Beliefs

Those who "think Indian" retain the primitive world view (6), recognizing an important and precious relationship between man, his fellows, nature, and his gods. They believe that man is part of an independent harmonious whole, a cog in the larger order of his community and nature, and hence without individual or independent career. The average American can at best appreciate only the beauty of nature, for his philosophy and theology focus on man's relationship with man and with his gods, bypassing the possibility of any interaction with his natural surroundings.

This handicap clouds the tourist's first view of an Indian community for, in being struck by the physical signs of poverty, he fails to appreciate the wealth of a people who are still attuned to the beauty of nature and who feel a rapport and spiritual attachment to the land they inhabit. The uncleanness of a dirt floor in a Navajo hogan may be sufficiently repugnant to mask the rich warmth of the human relationships in an extended family. By the tourist's yardstick, the material possessions of the reservation Indian may seem so sparse

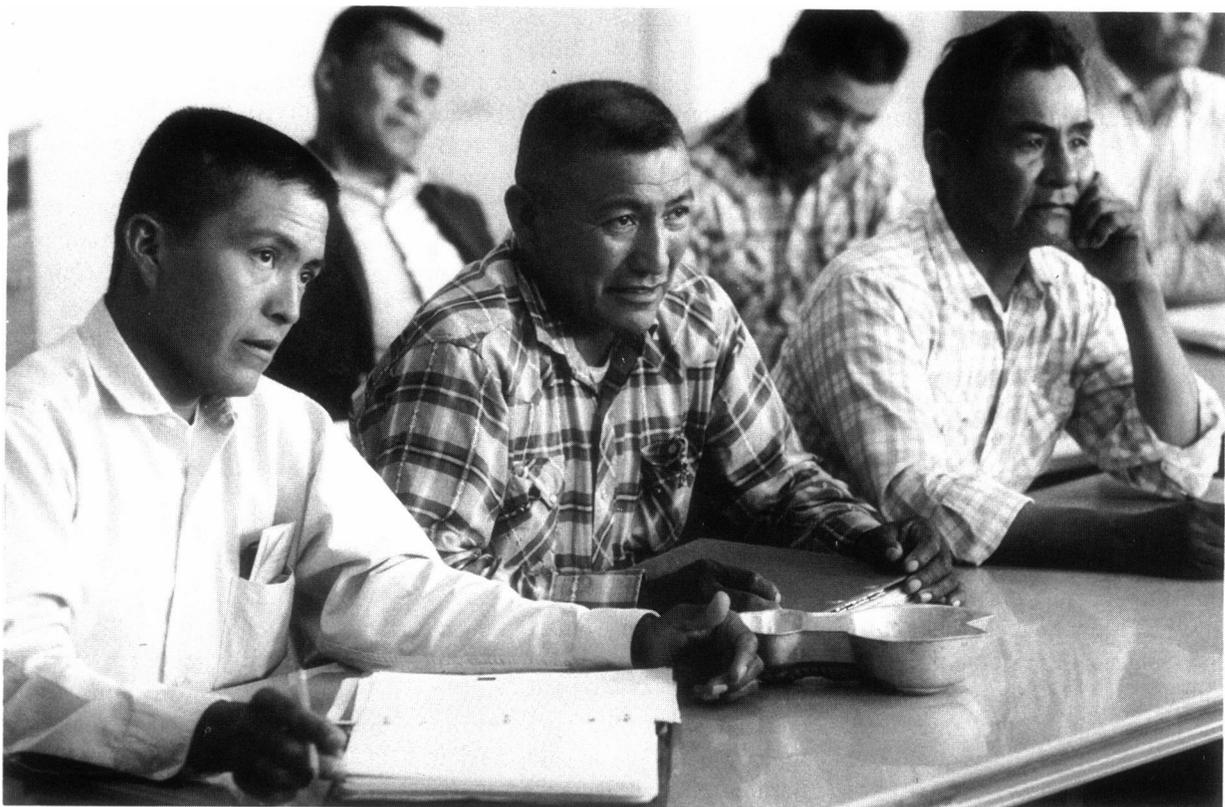
that he cannot understand how a sense of loyalty and generosity could permit an Indian community to survive on so little. Can he not see beyond the overcrowded homes the revered presence of grandparents, who as passers of tradition, play an important part in raising the children? Can he not see beyond the idleness and despair of these people the fierce sense of individual pride and strong expression of autonomy and freedom?

All of us could gain by incorporating the hallmarks of the American Indian's cultural difference: an interest in people rather than in things, a strong feeling of belonging, a need to share with others, dignity in harsh circumstances, a love of nature that does not exploit, and the measure of a man not by what he has or looks like or says but by what he is. These values, to which we are so often blind, make middle class Americans in contrast to Indians, seem culturally deprived (4).

Indians in the City

With this thought in mind, consider those Indians who, having never seen their reservations as anything but economically underdeveloped areas, have felt forced to abandon the degree of security and social control their communities represented (7) and have met the encroaching white culture on its home ground—the large urban center.

A few Indians have always left the reservation for a time for schooling and military service, and particularly for job opportunities, spurred on by non-Indian teachers and preachers who have considered tribal ways to be unqualified impediments and unhesitatingly have equated relocation in the white man's world with success. World War II



Instruction of Indians—the urban way

moved large numbers of Indian servicemen to within commuting distance of the cities for training and attracted others to defense industries. Twenty or more years later, many of these people became the Indian leaders who welcomed new arrivals—those coming to the cities for schooling, employment with the railroads, and adult vocational training programs, especially the voluntary relocation program of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (now the Bureau's employment assistance program).

This program was initiated in 1952 when 10 field relocation offices were established in major cities throughout the country. By July 1970, a total of 86,985 American Indians had migrated from their reservations to seek "stable employment and a new life" (8). The cultural shock of

leaving primary relationships and a folk society to enter a complex industrial order whose basic values violate many premises of Indian life was for many overwhelming (9). During the early years of the relocation program, 75 percent returned to the reservation. As emphasis shifted from immediate job placement to training, the proportion dropped to 35 percent.

Here was "marginal man," clearly caught between two cultures. While he retained a basic distrust of white men, he had been conditioned by the Federal Government to turn to them for money, services, and sometimes even emotional support (10). True egalitarian relationships with whites occurred infrequently, even for longtime Indian city dwellers, although they might work side by side with white men

to improve social conditions for other Indians who were constantly arriving.

While the chief reason for relocating was the wish to find steady employment, many Indians hoped to escape personal and family problems as well: heavy drinking, dependent relatives. But their problems were magnified under new pressures. Relocation demanded initiative and independence of thought and action in contrast to the conditioning of wardship on the reservation (1). They had been taught by their elders that one's possessions were of value only to the extent that they were shared. Budgeting and saving were foreign to them. Since time was a continuum from birth to death, time schedules were irrelevant, and deferring economic goals for an extended period of education

was little appreciated.

They listened to relocation counselors explain why they must conform to be accepted. Although they observed how members of middle class urban society had come to see themselves as objects to be shaped to fit the requirements of a complex modern culture and to be changed to meet goals holding promises of rewards, they could not accept themselves internally as a malleable entity (7). In the city they were billed for services they had always received free, and a slight illness or job layoff was enough to send them back to the reservation, fully aware of the depression that would follow the initial joy of reunion as they compared economic opportunities in the two locations.

Some Indians have adjusted to urban ways, but close questioning has disclosed that they do not internalize the new ways and that their basic "Indianness" has not been destroyed (7). While they can master the techniques needed to manipulate their environment, this thin veneer would be swept aside by the 75 percent who say they would return to their communities immediately if comparable employment opportunities were available. They feel they can survive in an alien culture, but they do not agree with the non-Indian evaluation that adjustment is success.

Indians normally do not seek friendships with whites in cities (7). Traditionally, they look upon whites with suspicion. They do not trust their motives, they have a sense of potential dependency on them, and they fear rejection by whites if they fall short of their definition of success. This feeling contributes to a characteristic reticence to discuss personal matters with non-Indi-

ans, which may appear to some to be disinterest, hostility, or dullness. From experience counselors have learned to counter in part with an attitude that invites discussion and to suggest choices rather than presume to always know the best answer (11).

The Indian's natural tendency to seek groups of persons most like himself should be accepted, and whites should be content to support these efforts rather than to encourage early participation in non-Indian social and recreational groups—to overcome a tendency to retain the Indian identification "for their own good."

Even the pan-Indian organizations have attracted only a small percentage of city-based Indians. They have influenced some briefly, but it is difficult to determine whether they are a cohesive force for the development and maintenance of their culture in the city, a structural defensive mechanism, or a terminal phase in the assimilation process. Their focus is still on the Indian nation as a separate people and on the traditional home areas as locations of choice.

Adjustment—The Best Way?

Now that you're wondering how must they feel?

Meaning them that you've chased 'cross

America's movie screens,

Now that you're wondering how can it be real

That the ones you call colorful, noble, and proud

In your school propaganda

They starve in their splendor,

You've asked for my comment, I simply will render

My country 'tis of thy people you're dying.

Can we respond to this plaint of the Indian folksinger, Buffy Sainte-Marie, with "I'm beginning to understand the problem,

but what is the solution?" Ultimately independence, perhaps, or at least, with other Americans, equal dependence on the Federal Government for broad services—but not abortive termination that would deny legal and moral commitments to most Indians.

Where oil, uranium, and other natural resources have been found in ample portions on Indian land, standards have been raised far above the subsistence level, and the question becomes academic. The Navajos, for example, have proved their ability to invest wisely in an independent future. Unlike many tribes who have made per capita payments that were instantly dissipated without changing the people's living standards, the Navajo tribe has invested in schools, economic development, and training opportunities that offer a long-term payoff to the community. Geographic isolation is the Navajos' greatest value and also their greatest handicap, since it limits delivery of health, education, and welfare services that could raise their standards of living.

Where poor climate exists, where scenic beauty is lacking, where accessibility is difficult, and where Indians are unable to relinquish their incapacitating dependence, some groups may have to be maintained on society's disabled list for a long, long time.

For most tribal groups there is a sense of expectancy as tribal plans are formulated in conjunction with concerned governmental agencies to use the economic potential of their communities. Manufacturing and recreational possibilities are being surveyed that will not endanger the life style of the people (12). With anticipation of the number that will be needed to run hotels, restaurants, community centers, his-

toric ruins, wildlife preserves, schools, courts, tribal headquarters, and a host of other settings, young Indian people are being sought, selected, and trained to assume positions of leadership in their home communities. Despite earnest efforts to train them as close to home as possible, relocation will often be necessary. But there will be a difference because the goal will be in line with their choice to live and work for and among their own people.

Helping people to help themselves has achieved far better relations abroad for the United States than outright doles—again confirming the folk wisdom that “the poor will never forgive you for what you do for them.” We have introduced modern technologies to the underdeveloped peoples of the world without presuming to change their traditional folkways of living. It would seem that this lesson could be applied to our dealings with the first Americans of this country.

We cannot undo the wrongs of our forefathers toward the natives of this land, who welcomed them with a spirit of sharing as brothers and then trampled them as impediments to progress. As long as they live, we will be reminded of this wrong while they retain their pride and dignity amidst humble circumstances that would threaten the emotional stability of most of us.

The Right to be Different

The rising rate of problem drinking and suicide among the Indians shows that something has been wrong with our approach (13). Can we accept the right of the Indian to be different—enough to invest in the “new” Indian, who will tell us what is best for him and asks for our trust and support as he attempts

to make the most of limited economic resources?

Huxley in his “Brave New World” predicted that the time would come when the world would be a sterile and efficient tribute to man’s willingness to sacrifice freedom of deed and expression for freedom from responsibility, and that vacations for most could be sought only through mind-altering drugs. It was his hope that the Indian communities would retain their potential to recharge our successors with basic human principles, if only as a reminder of what used to be. To do this, their communities cannot be treated as amusement parks, manned by skeleton crews of caretakers and concessionaires. Their lands must be cultural depositories of a viable people.

The possibility of achieving this can be fostered by asking what the American Indians are really like as a people and what can be done to help them achieve a more comfortable co-existence. The need for a new approach particularly responsive to their economic objectives is long overdue. For each community we must learn where the Indian people are materially and psychologically and then, with them, seek solutions within the framework of the Indian way.

We cannot make up for past mistakes; neither can we defend policies suggesting that the Indians are less capable or deserving of the best of our technology to achieve their goals merely because they patiently resist the efforts of the dominant society to absorb them. Let us revitalize and teach the real traditions of the Indians to our children before these traditions are lost, to the detriment of all of us.

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